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Where I mean to be
For all that, this New Year's Eve
Is Hardy country,
Lychgate and hoarfrost country,
In search of a darkling thrush.
– Seamus Heaney, 'Linked Verses'[1]

I.

In his 1929 war memoir *Goodbye to All That*, Robert Graves offers a pen-portrait of Thomas Hardy, based on a visit he made, with his wife Nancy Nicholson, to Hardy's Dorchester home, Max Gate, in the summer of 1920. The sketch is affectionately drawn, but Graves is not above serving his own ends too:

> I wrote out a record of the conversation we had with him. He welcomed us as representatives of the post-war generation. He said that he lived such a quiet life in Dorchester that he feared he was altogether behind the times. He wanted, for instance, to know whether we had any sympathy with the Bolshevik regime, and whether he could trust the *Morning Post*'s account of the Red Terror. [...] He asked whether I wrote easily, and I said that this poem was in its sixth draft and would probably be finished in two more. 'Why!', he said, 'I have never in my life taken more than three, or perhaps four, drafts for a poem. I am afraid of it losing its freshness.' [...] He talked of early literary influences, and said that he had none at all, for he did not come of literary stock. [...] (His taste in literature was certainly most unexpected. Once when Lawrence had ventured to say something disparaging against Homer's *Iliad*, he protested: 'Oh, but I admire the *Iliad* greatly. Why, it's in the *Marmion* class!'...) [...] In his opinion *vers libre* could come to nothing in England. 'All we can do is to write on the old themes in the new styles, but try to do a little better than those who went before us.'[2]

The sting is in the parenthetical tail of this passage, which incidentally is patronising towards Walter Scott as well as Hardy: this is classic and classical public school/Oxbridge snobbery towards what is 'other' at its worst. Also implicit here is the knowingness of the Great War survivor, attuned to the modern political zeitgeist, set against the uncomprehending older generation, who still read the newspapers with some degree of trust. That generation is treated in *Goodbye to All That* with some hostility, and newspaper reportage is subjected to ironic scrutiny: Hardy's question about the *Morning Post* shows a more benign humour at work, but it is still mockery for all that. The representation of Hardy here is one of the reasons Sassoon and Graves fought so bitterly in the aftermath of the publication of *Goodbye to All That*. Sassoon complained to Graves in 1930 that 'There was too much about you and too little about [Hardy's] greatness. The picture of him in your book is misleading, because it shows his simplicity without his impressiveness. Also you have got the *Marmion* anecdote wrong. I was there when it happened'. Graves responded with characteristic arrogance: 'I admired Hardy as a good, consistent, truthful man; I do not believe in *great* men. I treat everyone as an equal unless they prove themselves inferior'. One might have much sympathy therefore with Sassoon's last letter on the subject to Graves (a letter which effectively marks the end of their friendship) when he writes 'I wish you'd broken your rule, for once, and regarded T.H. as your superior until you found that you were his equal.'[3]

It's easy to dismiss this as mere squabbling, a kind of squabbling that Hardy's writing and reputation transcend. But there is a thread here pulled by other writers and critics in ways which have affected – and continue to affect – understanding of Hardy's profile and influence, both in the English tradition, and in the critically more neglected archipelagic context, notably in Ireland. As Donald Davie

1 Published in the *Irish Times*, 30 December 2000. The poem was later shortened and rewritten to become 'Midnight Anvil' in *District and Circle* (2006).

2 Robert Graves, *Good-bye to All That* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1929), 374-5, 376, 378-9.

3 SS to RG, 7 Feb 1920; RG to SS, 20 Feb. 1920; SS to RG, 2 Mar. 1920. In *Broken Images: Selected Letters of Robert Graves* 1914-1946, ed. Paul O'Prey (London: Hutchinson, 1982), 198, 201, 204.

once observed, 'affection' for Hardy the poet is often 'ruinously shot through with protectiveness, even condescension. Hardy is not thought of as an intellectual force.'[4] Graves's pen-portrait of Hardy, the very fact of his recording the conversation, might be interpreted as literary adulation, but it reads rather more as anthropological curiosity – Hardy as the strange unworldly creature sprung illiterate and Antaeus-like from the soil. 'Good', 'consistent', 'truthful' are admirable qualities: but one might as well add 'mediocre', 'uncritical' (in the pejorative sense of not knowing 'good' literature from 'bad'), naïve, and have done.

Three years later, in his influential study *New Bearings in English Poetry* (1932), F.R. Leavis draws on Graves's memoir to reinforce his own judgement on Hardy:

> Hardy is a naïve poet of simple attitudes and outlook. [...] He was betrayed into no heroic postures. He felt deeply and consistently, he knew what he felt and, in his best poems, communicated it perfectly. But there was little in his technique that could be taken up by younger poets, and developed in the solution of their own problems. His originality was not of the kind that goes with a high degree of critical awareness: it went, indeed, with a naïve conservatism. 'In his opinion', reports Mr Robert Graves in his superb autobiography, *Goodbye to All That*, '*vers libre* could come to nothing in England...' [...] The main impulse behind his verse is too commonly the mere impulse to write verse: 'Any little old song, will do', as he says. And, often to the lilt of popular airs, with a gaucherie compounded of the literary, the colloquial, the baldly prosaic, the conventionally poetical, the pedantic, and the rustic, he industriously turns out his despondent anecdotes, his 'life's little ironies', and his meditations upon a deterministic universe and the cruel accident of sentience. [...] That the setting, explicit or implied, is generally rural is a point of critical significance. Hardy was a countryman, and his brooding mind stayed itself habitually upon the simple pieties, the quiet rhythms, and the immemorial ritual of rustic life.
>
> It is very largely in terms of the absence of these, or of any

4 Donald Davie, *Thomas Hardy and British Poetry* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), 5.

> equivalent, that the environment of the modern poet must be described.[5]

New Bearings famously advocates Eliot's aesthetic in opposition to what Leavis sees as the defunct modes of Hardy, or of Georgian verse: Hopkins is rescued from the nineteenth century, and 'felt to be a contemporary';[6] but the real drive of the book is to argue that Eliot's is the 'strong originality' that 'triumph[s] over traditional habits', that 'in his work by 1920 English poetry had made a new start'.[7] Leavis also comes to this bold conclusion: 'It does not seem likely that it will ever again be possible for a distinguished mind to be formed...on the rhythms, sanctioned by nature and time, of rural culture.'[8]

As Edna Longley observes, 'in Leavis's version of emergent modern poetry, Eliot has out-manoeuvred Yeats', and in *New Bearings* we can also 'glimpse the hegemonic advance of T.S. Eliot's critical dicta'.[9] Eliot's consistent negativity towards Hardy is of relevance here too. In *After Strange Gods*, Eliot berates Hardy for his lack of either 'institutional attachment' (the Church) or 'objective beliefs'. 'He seems to me', Eliot goes on, 'to have written as nearly for the sake of "self-expression" as a man well can; and the self which he had to express does not strike me as a particularly wholesome or edifying matter of communication. He was indifferent even to the prescripts of good writing: he sometimes wrote overpoweringly well, but always very carelessly'.[10] Hardy's novels have 'a note of falsity', stemming from his 'deliberately relieving some emotion of his own at the expense of the reader'.[11] As poet, he fares little better at Eliot's hands. In a *Criterion* editorial coinciding with Yeats's 70th birthday, Eliot observes that Yeats's 'influence upon English poetry has been great and beneficial; upon Irish poetry it seems to me to have been disastrous. And...this is just what you should expect. For a great English poet to have a great

5 F.R. Leavis, *New Bearings in English Poetry* (1932; London: Penguin, 1963), 47-8, 49-50.

6 Ibid. 142.

7 Ibid. 62, 70

8 Ibid. 71-2.

9 Edna Longley, *Yeats and Modern Poetry* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2013), 149.

10 T.S. Eliot, *After Strange Gods: A Primer of Modern Heresy* (London: Faber, 1934), 54.

11 Ibid. 56.

influence in England, he must be considerably removed in time: for a literature can be fertilised by its own earlier periods as well as by contemporaries from outside'. If this already negates any possible Hardy-influence on English poetry, the point is then made explicit in the following comparison: 'Of the absolute greatness of any writer, men living in the same period can make only a crude guess. But it should be apparent at least that Mr. Yeats has been and is the greatest poet of his time. Thomas Hardy, who for a few years had all the cry, appears now, what he always was, a minor poet.'[12]

II.

Leavis couldn't predict the future – witness his investment in Ronald Bottrall over W.H. Auden – though like all canon-makers he tried. (His conclusions relating to poetry and rural culture, for instance, are more questionable in the Irish tradition – of which more anon; similarly, Eliot's views on Yeats and English poetry leave open, if inadvertently, the reverse possibility – Hardy's beneficial influence on Irish poetry.) Yet at the time, and in the decades following the publication of *New Bearings*, both Leavis's arguments, and Eliot's habitual hostility towards Hardy's work were sufficiently influential to affect, adversely, Hardy's critical standing. They were also sufficiently extreme to help prompt the anti-modernist backlash in England of the 1950s – a backlash which itself has a knock-on effect on Hardy's reputation. If after death, the poet, as Auden famously said in his elegy for Yeats, '[becomes] his admirers', then Hardy's admirer Larkin has also conditioned critical perceptions of his precursor – and not perhaps entirely in the way he intended. It is a critical commonplace to say that Larkin, between his first and second collections, *The North Ship* in 1945 and *The Less Deceived* in 1955, 'found' his own voice by exchanging Yeats's influence for Hardy's. 'I spent', he writes in 1965, 'three years trying to write like Yeats, not because I liked his personality or understood his ideas but out of infatuation with his music...[I]t is a particularly potent music...and has ruined many a better talent. [...] Every night after supper before opening my large dark green manuscript book I used to limber up by turning the pages of the 1933 plum-coloured Macmillan edition.... When reaction came

12 T.S. Eliot, 'Editorial', *The Criterion* vol. XIV no. LVII (July 1935), 612.

[through reading Hardy's poems], it was undramatic, complete and permanent.'[13] Hardy's distance from a metropolitan 'centre' appeals to a poet who writes of his own 'need to be on the periphery of things'. What he also learns from Hardy is, he says in 1982, 'not to be afraid of the obvious'.[14]

Larkin takes some of the terms by which Leavis critiques Hardy, and makes of them a case for a rather different 'bearing' in English poetry. Asked for his views on poetry in 1955, he produced the following (now notorious) statement: 'As a guiding principle I believe that every poem must be its own sole freshly created universe, and therefore have no belief in "tradition" or a common myth-kitty or casual allusions in poems to other poems or poets...'[15] Leavis on the other hand, even if sometimes and misleadingly associated with the New Criticism, did not believe the poem was its own self-contained universe; he is the great advocate of the great tradition; and allusiveness is at the heart of Eliot's 1920s enterprise. Dismissal here of the 'common myth-kitty' (contra Eliot's endorsement of the 'mythical method' in Yeats and Joyce) is also a dismissal of a Yeatsian 'anima mundi', that 'storehouse' of symbols, or of Yeats's later 'Vision'. Hardy may be read as conscripted by Larkin – the Larkin who professed, however misleadingly, to spurn what is 'foreign' – on national grounds too, against the Irish and American ('international') voices of Yeats, Joyce, Eliot and Pound. What is 'other' is rejected in the interests of navel-gazing at a microcosmic England: whether that 'England' finds its centre in Dorchester or Hull really doesn't matter, as long as it's not Berlin, Dublin, Paris – or even London.

So Larkin 'rescues' Hardy from Eliot and Leavis for a new generation. But he does so in oppositional terms that don't accurately reflect Hardy's relation to poets such as Yeats, or indeed reflect the complex play of influences in Larkin's own aesthetic. It is as much a critical commonplace now to point out that Yeats's influence persists in Larkin's work. Hardy and Yeats, rather than one displacing the other,

13 Philip Larkin, *Required Writing: Miscellaneous Pieces 1955-1982* (London: Faber, 1983) 29.

14 Ibid. 55, 67.

15 Ibid. 79.

represent twin poles of Larkin's aesthetic, complementary figures onto whom he projects different aspects of a divided self. But this is not how Larkin chose to view the matter in the Hardy affirmations found so habitually in his critical writings from the 1950s to the early 1980s, and the existence of this kind of Yeats-Hardy opposition is, on the whole, also how Donald Davie reads the situation in the early 1970s. In *Thomas Hardy and British Poetry* (1973) Davie sets out the powerful thesis that 'in British poetry of the last fifty years (as not in American) the most far-reaching influence, for good and ill, has been not Yeats, still less Eliot or Pound, not Lawrence, but *Hardy*'. It is an influence, he concedes, that not all poets are prepared to acknowledge, notably in the case of Irish, Scottish and Welsh poets 'who do not care to be indebted to such an intransigently English poet as Hardy'. Yet while Davie, by contrast, rightly points towards Hardy's influence on Austin Clarke and others, he also argues that Hardy 'has the effect of locking any poet whom he influences into the world of historical contingency, a world of specific places at specific times',[16] with the consequence that:

> Hardy appears to have mistrusted, and certainly leads other poets to mistrust, the claims of poetry to transcend the linear unrolling of recorded time. This is at once Hardy's strength and his limitation; and it sets him irreconcilably at odds with for instance Yeats, who exerts himself repeatedly to transcend historical time by seeing it as cyclical, so as to leap above it into a realm that is visionary, mythological, and (in some sense or to some degree) eternal. It ought to be possible for any reader to admire and delight in both Hardy and Yeats, if only because so much of the finest Yeats is concerned with the effort of transcendence rather than the achievement of it. But for any poet who finds himself in the position of choosing between these two masters, the choice cannot be fudged; there is no room for compromise.[17]

As for Yeats himself on the subject of Hardy – whom he met in 1912, dining with Henry Newbolt at Max Gate and presenting Hardy with a Royal Society of Literature gold medal – his occasional comments are not encouraging, even if he did, along with 42 other poets, contribute

16 Davie, *Thomas Hardy and British Poetry*, 3-4.

17 Ibid. 4.

a handwritten poem in 1919 to mark Hardy's 79th birthday.[18] Yeats read Lionel Johnson's *The Art of Thomas Hardy* in 1894 (a study of the fiction; Hardy's first volume of poems did not appear until 1898) and observed: 'I feel...that there is something wrong about praising Hardy in a style so much better than his own. I wish [Lionel] had written instead of Dante or Milton'.[19] As Louis MacNeice notes, when it comes to the poetry, Yeats 'conveniently' forgot about Hardy and Housman when it suited him[20] – more particularly, one might add, when he wished to identify the trends and failings of modern poetry and associate those trends with England rather than Ireland. Yeats's argument that Irish poetry 'moves in a different direction and belongs to a different story'[21] is a necessary distancing of himself from Eliot and modernism. In Yeats's introduction to the 1936 *Oxford Book of Modern Verse*, if Hardy does come off better than Eliot (who, according to Yeats, 'produced his great effect...because he has described men and women that get out of bed or into it from mere habit'), the brief mention of Hardy is a less than ringing endorsement, and his achievement compares unfavourably to Synge's:

> In Ireland, [there] still lives almost undisturbed the last folk tradition of western Europe...but the reaction from rhetoric, from all that was prepense and artificial, has forced upon...writers now and again, as upon my own early work, a facile charm, a too soft simplicity. In England came like temptations. *The Shropshire Lad* is worthy of its fame, but a mile further and all had been marsh. Thomas Hardy, though his work lacked technical accomplishment, made the necessary correction through his mastery of the impersonal objective scene. John Synge brought back masculinity to Irish verse with his harsh disillusionment...[22]

18 See Ralph Pite, *Thomas Hardy: The Guarded Life* (London: Picador, 2006), 441.

19 W.B. Yeats to Olivia Shakespear, 6 August 1894, *The Letters of W.B. Yeats*, ed. Allan Wade (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1954), 235

20 Louis MacNeice, *The Poetry of W.B. Yeats* (1941; London: Faber, 1962), 87.

21 W.B. Yeats, 'Modern Poetry: A Broadcast', *Essays and Introductions* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1961), 506-7.

22 W.B. Yeats, 'Introduction', *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1936), p.xiii., xxi

III.

If all this might seem to reinforce Davie's argument for irreconcilable differences between Yeats and Hardy, Davie's contemporary, Denis Donoghue, has painted a different picture (Davie and Donoghue were based, respectively, at TCD and UCD in the 1950s). Contributing to 'A Yeats Symposium' for the *Guardian* in 1989, marking the fiftieth anniversary of Yeats's death, Donoghue observes that:

> Increasingly, it seems unsatisfactory to think of Yeats in relation to Modernism; or, to be precise, in close association with Pound and Eliot. [...] Released from these affiliations, Yeats now seems a major poet within the large context of post-romantic poetry; he is closer to Hardy and Stevens than to Eliot, Pound, Joyce, or Wyndham Lewis. [...] He seems to be a poet comparable to Hardy for accomplishment and scale; like Hardy a great poet of love and death and the other perennial themes.[23]

Donoghue's phrasing is ('seems') tentative, but to associate Yeats most closely, not with international modernism, but with a poet once seen as the quintessence of a provincial Englishness, marks a sea-change. And that sea-change probably owes something to the work of Irish poets who, from the 1970s-1980s onwards, have asserted Hardy's relevance to modern Irish poetry.

In that context, we might recall the review by A.N. Wilson in the *Spectator* in 1982 of Motion and Morrison's *The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry*:

> Yeats, Hugh MacDiarmid and Dylan Thomas all wrote English poetry. British poetry sounds about as appetising as Traveller's Fare on British Rail. This *British* business was started by the BBC when they began to flood the air with programmes and voices from Northern Ireland. [...] Seamus Heaney is...described solemnly as 'the most important new poet of the last 15 years, and the one we very deliberately put first in our anthology'. 'Important' is the give-away word here. No one can seriously pretend that Heaney is a particularly good or interesting poet. He certainly is not in the same class as Yeats, with whom he has been compared. He is not half as good as Geoffrey Hill or Ted Hughes. Yet for some reason he was

23 'A Yeats Symposium', *Guardian*, 27 Jan. 1989, 25-6.

> taken up by the Sunday-newspaper dons...since when his quietly minor accomplishments have been smothered in self-importance, his own and that of his admirers. If Heaney is 'major', what word do you use to describe Wordsworth? At his best, Heaney writes sub-Paterian prose-poems, with the rural life of Ulster as his theme. But...Heaney has nothing whatever to *say*.[24]

A.N. Wilson on Heaney in 1982, in one of the worst instances of getting it wrong, is rather reminiscent, in its essentials, of F.R. Leavis on Hardy in 1932 (although Wilson's deliberately provocative mud-slinging here is a far cry from Leavis's considered scholarship). Both Hardy and Heaney are minor poets of minor accomplishments, with rural life as a theme ('provincial' isn't said, but it's there), meaning in effect, they have 'nothing' to say to today's world. It strikes some chords too with Eliot's observation that Hardy had 'all the cry', that his reputation had been over-inflated.

When Leavis observed that there was 'little in [Hardy's] technique that could be taken up by younger poets and developed in the solution of their own problems' he may have had a partial point, in as much as it is Hardy's subject-matter and aesthetic positioning more than his technique that influence the Irish poetic tradition. Yet what Leavis could not foresee was the emergence of a cultural context in Northern Ireland that posed particular problems for poets – the violent collision of tradition and modernity; the elegist's need to speak out and yet the guilt in doing so; the redefinition of the supposed periphery as an aesthetic (and in Northern Ireland political) centre; the need to reinvent and yet retain traditional forms – in the addressing of which Hardy could serve as exemplar. Nor could Leavis foresee that it would once more be possible once again for a reputation and a mind to be formed 'on the rhythms...of rural culture'.

The terms by which Leavis dismisses Hardy as a negligible influence – a 'countryman' writing about 'rustic life' with a supposedly 'naïve' formal conservatism and an 'outsider' status – are the ones which now seem to confirm his importance. (Not least, the ecocritical debates of recent years serve to reorient thematic priorities.) The rural, the local, the manipulation of traditional rhythms – these are all the things

24 A.N.Wilson, 'A Bloodless Miss', *Spectator*, 27 November 1982, 28-9.

that give Heaney the 'international' purchase which for Leavis would have been, ironically, one of the measures of greatness. It's Leavis's 'metropolitan' stance and his association of *vers libre* with originality that now look rather dated, not Hardy. And Leavis also overlooks the area where Hardy helps to redefine a genre for his inheritors, which is as elegist. As Jahan Ramazani argues, in his study of modern elegy from Hardy to Heaney, Hardy 'reinvigorates the elegy by helping to shift its psychic bases from the rationalizing consolations of normative grief to the more intense self-criticisms and vexations of melancholic mourning'.[25] Where Yeats links his mourning work to 'a disappearing aristocratic vision', Hardy 'associates his...with a threatened rural outlook'[26]: in that sense he is an important influence for a contemporary generation, repelled by Yeats's autocratic politics if not by his forms. Ramazani argues convincingly that Hardy's elegies anticipate those of Yeats, Eliot and Pound, that he is a 'key transitional figure' who 'presages the tension in much 20th century poetry between the elegiac and the anti-elegiac'.[27] The intensities of the Northern Irish experience over the last four decades, a site of contested memory and space, with its tensions between religious tradition and secularity, have brought elegy into particular focus. The Great War protest-elegy offers one model for Northern Irish poets; and behind it is Hardy's *Poems of 1912-13*. (One of the poems A.N. Wilson derides – Heaney's 'Casualty' – is in an obvious rhythmical dialogue with Yeats, more particularly with Yeats's 'The Fisherman'; but its speaker's guilt in the mourning process also owes something to Hardy, as do its rhythms of rural life.)

Radical in terms of genre, Hardy is also 'both conservative and radical in matters of form': he 'adheres to the metered line but roughs up prosodic and syntactic polish; he appropriates Romantic diction but fashions many jarring locutions'.[28] There are echoes here of J.M. Synge's expressed need for verse to be 'brutal', or later of Heaney's desire to 'take the English lyric and make it eat stuff that it has never

25 Jahan Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 5.

26 Ibid. 13.

27 Ibid. 34.

28 Ibid. 36.

eaten before'.[29] Like Hardy, Northern Irish poets have come under fire for their adherence to traditional forms and yet have always rejected a too-easy association of experimental form with anti-hierarchical politics. And, not least, Hardy as the poet of place plays an important role in the aesthetic development of Heaney, Longley, or Paulin.

If critics have perhaps been slow to pick up on Hardy's presence in the contemporary Irish poetry scene (a notable exception is Tara Christie's article, 'Seamus Heaney's Hardy' from 2004), this is not necessarily true of the poets themselves. Tom Paulin's first critical book is *Thomas Hardy: The Poetry of Perception* (1975), based on his graduate thesis. It bears the marks of his friendship with (and mentoring by) Douglas Dunn, both of whom studied at Hull, overlapping with Larkin's time as librarian there. In the introduction to the book, Paulin's concern is, in part, to differentiate his work from, and quarrel with, Davie's 1973 *Thomas Hardy and British Poetry*. Davie comes under fire for insufficient appreciation of Douglas Dunn's work, and for anxieties that aren't Hardy's problem but Davie's (what Paulin detects as his 'dissatisfaction with a confused entity composed of Hardy's poetry, English suburban sprawl, and certain British poets').[30] He also rescues Hardy and Larkin from Davie's critique of their limited horizons, and in doing so (as elsewhere in the book) opts for comparison with Yeats on some fundamental principles, in spite of their obvious differences:

> When Davie criticizes Hardy and Larkin for infrequently breaking into, 'without meaning to and without noticing', imaginative levels that Tomlinson continually inhabits, we ought to be aware of just how thin the air up there can be. Yeats, who is Hardy's opposite, knew this.[31]

Paulin's study also comes at a time when he was working on his first collection, *A State of Justice*, published in 1977, poems whose tone, idiom, and forms are familiar enough to those who know Dunn's early poetry, or Larkin's work. 'Inishkeel Parish Church' evidences the debt to both:

Standing at the gate before the service started,

29 Quoted in Neil Corcoran, *Poets of Modern Ireland* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1999), 177.

30 Tom Paulin, *Thomas Hardy: The Poetry of Perception* (London: Macmillan, 1975), 6.

31 Ibid. 10.

In their Sunday suits, the Barrets talked together,
Smiled shyly at the visitors who packed the church
In summer...
[...]
Then, before the recognitions and the talk,
There was an enormous sight of the sea,
A silent water beyond society.

In 1986, *Thomas Hardy: The Poetry of Perception* was published in a second edition, with a new introduction. This time Paulin begins, not with Grigson, but by ecumenically associating Hardy with Hopkins, and the positioning of the work on Hardy has completely changed. Paulin is no longer tinkering around the edges of Donald Davie and British poetry; this is a new 'funky' Hardy for Ireland in the 1980s, and for a 'new' Tom Paulin. Both Hopkins and Hardy, he argues, 'hold to an aesthetic of "cunning irregularity" and aim for a poetry of syncopated texture rather than melodious veneer. For them, the highest form of poetic language is rapid, extempore, jazz-like and "funky".'[32] Both are associated with a Gothic tradition. That tradition 'is northern and consonantal and its roots are in the people rather than in the court. The Gothic poet writes poems that have a fricative, spiky, spoken texture... [with a] populist delight in rough, scratchy sounds...'. Through such writers, he argues, 'literary English has been periodically refreshed by an Antaeus-like contact with the earth'.[33] Furthermore, Hardy (like Paulin himself?) is, in this reading, anti-(British) establishment:

> Imperialist, racist, reactionary, sexist...Tennyson is in brilliant command of a dead language. [...] Hardy belongs outside this institutional, official reality. He grew up in a rural society where most people spoke dialect and where illiteracy was normal. [...] As a writer, Hardy was caught between a provincial oral culture of song, talk, legend, and a metropolitan culture of print, political power and what linguists used to term R.P....And when Hardy asserted that a "certain provincialism of feeling" was invaluable in a writer and set that idea against Arnold's idea of culture – an idea hostile to provincialism – he was referring to a mode of feeling that is bound

32 Tom Paulin, *Thomas Hardy: The Poetry of Perception* (2nd ed. London: Macmillan, 1986), 3.

33 Ibid. 3-4.

> in with song, dialect, physical touch, natural human kindness and what he terms "crude enthusiasm". He does not mean provincial in the Chekhovian sense of stifled ambition and anxious mediocrity.

Partly the revision of the introduction here brings it into line with Paulin's changed political thinking in the 1980s, as a (protestant) republican concerned with the 'Language Question' in Ireland, about the politics of Ulster-Scots and Irish language use. The Paulin of a poem such as 'Off the Back of a Lorry' from *Liberty Tree* (1983), with its 'gritty / sort of prod baroque / I must return to / like my own boke', has travelled some way from 'Inishkeel Parish Church'. In changing the terms of the debate about Hardy, Paulin separates himself from the Anglocentricity of the Davie/Larkin axis. And Hardy becomes a fellow-traveller on this journey. 'Funky' language Hardy, dialect, song: these all connect to Paulin's own language preoccupations in Ulster; the 'northern Gothic' obliquely evokes an Anglo-Irish Protestant gothic tradition from Edgeworth to Stoker. He also asserts the margin against the 'centre', a post-colonial reinvigoration of a dying English tradition: Hardy, 'outside' this imperial and institutional centre, thus becomes the bedfellow of Yeats and Joyce, as of Heaney and Paulin – those who took, as Joyce has it in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, the language that was not 'theirs', and yet made it their own. To set Hardy's 'provincialism' against Arnold's is to echo Patrick Kavanagh's celebration of the 'parish' as the 'universe'. It is also to conscript Hardy for the backlash against Arnold in Irish Studies in the 1980s, where Arnold comes under fire for his attempt, in *On the Study of Celtic Literature* (1867) at, as Seamus Deane has it, 'killing home rule by kindness'.[34] Since Arnold's book prompted Yeats's defence of Ireland and its traditions in the 1902 essay 'The Celtic Element in Literature', Paulin's new Hardy is also therefore a rather unlikely ally of W.B. Yeats. He draws out the links further:

> Hardy's lines draw profoundly on the folk imagination, and...that imagination overrides the great division between life and death – it locates the resurrection in the self-delighting wildness of sheer rhythm. And this resembles Yeats's remark that passionate rhythm preserves and transforms personal emotion by lifting it out of history into the realm of 'impersonal meditation'. [...] Ultimately,

34 See for example the arguments in Seamus Deane, 'Arnold, Burke and the Celts', *Celtic Revivals* (London: Faber, 1985), 17-27.

> Hardy is close to Yeats in the connection which he makes between vocal rhythm and mystery... [...] It's as if the muse visits him only when he learns to reject the instrumental will (rhythms of 'choice') for a more intuitive, 'rougher' type of verse which is rooted in rural speech, the Dorset accent and the formally very sophisticated dialect verse of William Barnes. This can only be discovered through a surrender to natural magic and superstition, through a creative idleness rather than a forcing ambition.[35]

Where Larkin's own creative process required the artificial separation of Hardy and Yeats, Paulin's requires their artificial yoking together. Whether or not these sentences are wholly convincing, it's notable that they litter a description of Hardy with Yeatsian terminology and quotation – 'the great division', 'resurrection, 'self-delighting', 'Antaeus-like', 'mystery', 'natural magic' (which is, for Yeats, in 'The Celtic Element in literature', Ireland's 'ancient religion').

IV.

Whether putting the Ulster into Wessex or the Wessex into Ulster, this criticism stands as testament to Hardy's cultural (and political) significance for the Northern Irish writer at a particular moment in history. That significance is also true, in a different way, for Michael Longley and for Seamus Heaney. Longley's 'Poetry', from *The Weather in Japan* (2000), traces the link between Hardy and the poets of the Western Front – among them Edward Thomas – whose influence pervades Longley's own work too: 'When Thomas Hardy died his widow gave Blunden / As memento of many visits to Max Gate / His treasured copy of Edward Thomas's *Poems*.' For Longley, Hardy as love poet subtly inflects Longley's own marital love poems; his 'Mayo Monologues' cross Kavanagh's influence with Hardy; and as one of the outstanding elegists of his generation, for whom the Great War protest-elegy looms large in his own development, Hardy's refiguring of elegy affects Longley's own practice, even if at one remove. For Heaney, as Tara Christie persuasively demonstrates, his 'fifty-year engagement with the works of Thomas Hardy has played a central, complex, and every-changing role in Heaney's poetic vision'. It is, she argues 'perhaps because Hardy entered Heaney's imagination so early

35 Paulin, *Thomas Hardy*, 2nd ed., 9, 10-11.

on, because his influence was so intimately and seamlessly blended into Heaney's poetic vision from its outset, that Hardy's presence in Heaney's poetry has gone largely unnoticed. For Hardy has never *not* been a part of Heaney.'[36]

For Heaney, Hardy's parish, like Kavanagh's, makes its own importance: the two poets connect for him in the formation of his own aesthetic, and in his sensing of place. 'I always' Heaney says, 'felt something familiar about Hardy's landscape, and indeed about the figures in his landscape'.[37] (In *Stepping Stones*, Heaney relates how, on meeting Kavanagh, 'I either commended Thomas Hardy or asked what he himself thought of Hardy, but he was on to me like a shot – suspected I was making too nifty a link between one "country" poet and another...'. [38]) Whilst a lecturer at Queen's University Belfast in the late 1960s, Heaney taught a series of undergraduate seminars on Thomas Hardy. The set text list was as follows:

> *The Return of the Native*
> *The Mayor of Casterbridge*
> *The Woodlanders*
> *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*
> *Selected Poems*
> *Hardy's Love Poems*, ed. Carl Weber

The seminars on Hardy were 'to be concerned with the following topics':

1. Character and plot in Hardy's Novels: determined or self-determining?
2. Suffering in the novels: scourge or salvation?
3. The poetry: culmination of Hardy's vision?[39]

The texts are given in chronological order of publication, but *The Return of the Native* topping the list is serendipitous here. In 'The

36 Tara Christie, 'Seamus Heaney's Hardy', *The Recorder* vol. 17 no. 1 (Summer 2004), 118-19

37 Quoted in Christie, 119.

38 Dennis O'Driscoll, *Stepping Stones: Interviews with Seamus Heaney* (London: Faber, 2008), 73.

39 This information is from a discarded typewritten sheet left in a box in an office in Queen's, and found by Dr Eamonn Hughes in the early 1990s. I am grateful to Dr Hughes for drawing my attention to it, and for sight of the handout.

Birthplace', from *Station Island* (1984), one of three 'tribute' poems to Hardy, the poet remembers how, thirty years previously, he 'read until first light // for the first time, to finish / *The Return of the Native*'. If there is a political resonance to this – given Heaney's comments on Kavanagh's confidence in his parish as a means of bringing 'the subculture to cultural power'[40] – there is also, in the final lines of the poem, an astonishing sense of homecoming for Heaney in Hardy's fiction: 'I heard / roosters and dogs, the very same / as if he had written them'. Elsewhere, he describes how Hardy's 'The Oxen' was learnt 'by heart early on....the words "barton" and "coomb" seemed to take me far away and at the same time to bring me close to something lurking inside me. Then there was the phrase, "their strawy pen", which had a different familiarity, it brought the byre and the poetry book into alignment.'[41]

A 'different familiarity' might encapsulate Hardy's appearance in two poems from *Seeing Things* (1991), 'Lightenings vi' and 'vii'. In them, we find a Hardy who makes sense to Heaney, who, like himself, is a poet whose roots cross with his reading, whose rural background in all its sensuous immediacy is the foundation on which he will later 'sing' the 'perfect pitch' of himself:

> Once, as a child, out in a field of sheep,
> Thomas Hardy pretended to be dead
> And lay down flat among their dainty shins.
>
> In that sniffed-at, bleated-into, grassy space
> He experimented with infinity.

This might seem to be a version of the natural, unsophisticated, grounded Hardy, derided by Leavis and Eliot, celebrated, conversely, by Heaney, and a long way from Paulin's gritty, funky, political Hardy. Nevertheless, Heaney here creates his own Hardy too, and for different ends. Heaney's Hardy is also a visionary poet, experimenting with 'infinity', and the poem, as 'Lightenings vii' then shows, finds the visionary ambition in Hardy in part because it misremembers the

40 Seamus Heaney, in *Reading the Future: Irish Writers in Conversation with Mike Murphy* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 2000), 84-5.

41 Seamus Heaney, interview with John Brown, *In the Chair: Interviews with Poets from the North of Ireland* (Ireland: Salmon Publishing, 2002), 77.

anecdote (in fact, 'He went down on all fours...sought the creatures face to face'.) As Tara Christie points out, Hardy's childhood, through the misremembering, thus merges with Heaney's own, in which Heaney would visit the cattle-shed, to sit or stand 'quietly beside these big peaceful beasts, wondering if they were taking any heed of me or not'.[42] Similarly, 'The Birthplace', while returning Hardy to his origins, also makes him resonate in a new context. Section I is obliquely evocative of Yeats, with the 'stir' of Hardy's 'reluctant heart', as it echoes early Mahon too, the Mahon of 'The Studio' or 'Courtyards in Delft' ('The deal table where he wrote, so small and plain, / the single bed a dream of discipline...'). The line break after 'That day, we were like one' momentarily implies the two poets' affinity, only to transform the speaker into a (suffering) character in one of Hardy's novels: 'like one / of his troubled couples, speechless / until he spoke for them'. The poem allows 'Hardy' (Hardy the novelist, also the Hardy of 'The Voice') to articulate Heaney, all the while speaking both to and for Hardy, Heaney simultaneously creating a character of his own. And the opening of section III – 'Everywhere being nowhere / who can prove / one place more than another?' – is not so much a denial of specificity but a recognition that Hardy, like Heaney after him, has 'proved' a particular place, be it 'Wessex' or Anahorish, against those who would dismiss it as insignificant – to the extent that it can become, at least for Heaney, an imagined realm – '[u]tterly empty', as he has it in the 'Clearances' sequence of *The Haw Lantern* (1987), 'utterly a source'.

In Edna Longley's *Bloodaxe Book of 20th-Century Poetry* (2000), Hardy and Yeats stand at the beginning of the century. The very first poem in that anthology – Hardy's 'The Darkling Thrush' – defines both a century's end and its beginning, and is evoked by Heaney in his own 'millennium' poem quoted as epigraph to this essay. Longley's opening remarks on Hardy encapsulate the shape of critical recognition owed on both sides of the Irish sea: 'Thomas Hardy anticipates every crossroads of modern poetry in the British Isles. He stands between folk-traditions and literature; region and metropolis; Christianity and the post-Darwinian crisis of faith; Victorian and modern consciousness; prose-fiction and poetry; "things [that] go

42 See Christie, 'Seamus Heaney's Hardy', 131-2.

onward the same" and modern war.'[43] It is apparent, even looking briefly at his reception in England and Ireland, that Hardy is different things to different people: Eliot's Hardy is not Larkin's, or Paulin's, or Heaney's Hardy. In standing at a 'crossroads' he leads in multiple directions, and the danger is that in being at once everywhere he is fully appreciated nowhere. Yet more positively, the closing lines of Heaney's 'Lightenings vi' might serve as metaphor for Hardy's reaching 'outward' in terms of influence, as well as being returned to his proper 'place' in the criticism of modern poetry:

...that stir he caused
In the fleece-hustle was the original

Of a ripple that would travel eighty years
Outward from there, to be the same ripple
Inside him at its last circumference.

43 Edna Longley, ed. *The Bloodaxe Book of 20th Century Poetry from Britain and Ireland* (Tarset: Bloodaxe, 2000), 25.